

**The Unity of Christians:
The Vision of Paul Couturier**

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Couturier and The Invisible Monastery In England

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First, I want to say what an immense joy it is for me to be in Westminster with fellow enthusiasts for the life, work and legacy of Abbé Paul Couturier, our ecumenical father-in-God. More than forty years of my life have been spent in praying for unity, directly inspired by his influence. This has been mostly within the enclosure of my own monastic setting. However, by analogy with the Abbé's concept of the Invisible Monastery, this very enclosure has enhanced rather than hindered my ecumenical vision. In the realm of the Spirit there are no walls, and any that have been created through our own sinfulness do not, as we know, reach up to heaven. So it is good to have leapt temporally over the enclosure wall and to be sharing something of my own and my Community's involvement in spiritual ecumenism with you.

To begin with, a brief outline of our history. The Community of the Holy Cross was founded in 1857 at Wapping, the heart of what was then London's dockland, by Mother Elizabeth Neale, sister of John Mason Neale (the famous hymnographer), and by Father Charles Lowder, well-known slum priest and founder and first incumbent of the parish of St Peter's London Docks.

At first, we were a mission-sisterhood with branch houses in various parts of the country. In 1887 a mother-house was built at Haywards Heath in Sussex. Gradually over the years the ethos of the Community changed, the Benedictine Rule and sevenfold office being adopted. Branch houses were closed and eventually any Community works were undertaken solely within the monastic enclosure. In 1979 the Community moved to Rempstone near Loughborough (in the Anglican diocese of Southwell), our present home.

How does prayer and work for unity slot into this? Quite simply, it has been there all along. 1857 saw not only the foundation of our Community but also the inauguration of APUC, the Association for the Promotion of the Unity of Christendom. APUC claimed to be the first society in England established specifically to pray for unity between Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Orthodox, and had a considerable number of members from all three churches. Father Lowder (our co-founder) was a foundation member, as were many other priests in the Anglican Society of the Holy Cross, another brainchild of Father Lowder.

Throughout the early days of the Church Unity Octave, prior to Abbé Couturier, the Community was at prayer, our emphasis then being mostly on union with the Church of Rome. Through the influence of a long-term resident Priest-Warden we were in fact gradually led into a more extreme Anglo-Papalist position. Yet not everyone in Community went wholly along with this and certainly not all of the clergy connected with us. Father Albert Phyll, for example, Chaplain at our then retreat house at Limpsfield, visited Abbé Couturier, but secretly for fear of the Warden, who would have deemed the Abbé's broader ecumenism as verging on heresy!

In 1954 the said Warden died, and the community came to a crossroads. It was too late for the Abbé to visit, but not for us to fall profoundly under his influence. Bishop George Bell as our Visitor opened up the vistas of a broader ecumenism to us, as did the influence and support of Father O'Brien SSJE, Dom Benedict Ley of Nashdom Abbey, Brother Francis SSF, the young Roman Catholic Olivetan Dom Benedict Heron and not least our new Warden, Canon Donald Rea, vicar of Eye in Suffolk. We went full steam ahead.

By the end of the 1950s we were linked with the Unity Centre at Lyon and found ourselves translating and distributing the Week of Prayer material produced there by Abbé Couturier's successors Père Pierre Michalon and Père Maurice Villain – albeit ours went out a year later than theirs at the start, I am told. Similarly we translated and sent out, in leaflet form two or three times a year, the spirituality notes shared by members of the Invisible Monastery. Copies of these early leaflets are still extant in our archives.

Although the direct link with Lyon gradually slackened, as the Week of Prayer really took off and the World Council of Churches, etc., became involved, we have continued the Spirituality leaflets through the years. Firstly they remained in printed form, quoting substantially from the

writings of well-known ecumenists and others. Then, from 1978 onwards we have written and produced the leaflets ourselves. These are still in circulation with a mailing list of about a thousand, here and overseas. The current ones, sixty-fifth in the series, are, not surprisingly, about Abbé Paul Couturier. Back numbers, covering the various spiritual traditions, Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, Jewish and so on, are available also from our Convent of the Holy Cross at Rempstone, near Loughborough. As a further point of interest, in 1959 we translated and had printed a *Short Life* of the Abbé by Père Maurice Villain. This managed to get an *imprimatur* from the Westminster diocese, since they failed to realise they were dealing with Anglican Sisters! I expect Paul Couturier was chuckling in heaven.

My own ecumenical journey with the Community began when I entered in 1961. An early recollection I have is of craning my neck from my place as a postulant in the Lady Chapel as I tried in vain to catch a glimpse of the delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church. They were hidden out of my sight in the large sanctuary of the Sisters' choir, having come over for Archbishop Michael Ramsey's enthronement and were being shepherded round various places of ecumenical interest. I was smitten for life by the beauty and pathos of their chant.

There was also among the Sisters at that time a tangible excitement and a degree of justifiable pride. Only two years earlier in 1959, the Warden Canon Donald Rea had been in Rome. During a short private audience with Pope John XXIII, he had unbelievably received from the Pope, in an impromptu gesture of generosity and Christian love, his own four-volume breviary which he had used when Patriarch of Venice. The Press got hold of the story. Here I quote from the Irish Daily Express of September 13th 1959:

‘t the end of the interview the Pope looked at a copy of the breviary which Mr Rea was carrying and said: “That book looks a bit shabby. Mine is not new but it is newer than that. You can have mine.” ’

Later a Cardinal handed him four leather-bound books. Each is stamped with the gold crest of the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice and inside in the Pope's handwriting is his name (these books are now in the Lambeth Palace Library). But even that was not quite all. Canon Rea mentioned his Holy Cross Sisters and their prayer for Unity. Pope John asked how many nuns there were

and calling for some rosaries blessed them and gave them to the Canon, one for each Sister. I still have the one that was eventually passed on to me and treasure it.

In my early days in the Community the Abbé's spirituality was obviously much in evidence. Every Thursday we burned the Unity candle and the familiar papers with his prayers and litanies were always at hand. We had our evening Holy Hour with the intention of Unity (still our practice today, in fact). Maria Gabriella (see the paper by Dom Basil Matthews) was a huge inspiration for me.

Then we all lived and prayed through the heady days of Vatican II and the exciting developments that followed, the ARCIC talks, and the rest. We busied ourselves producing and distributing our Unity leaflets, making new contacts through visitors from many different denominations and through our postal apostolate, here and overseas. Friendships were made with Roman Catholic fellow-religious for instance. Our vision was expanding all the time to incorporate not only the various Christian churches and traditions but also Judaism and the other great world religions. It has been like juggling innumerable balls in the air – seeking to hold the various strands together, principally through costly prayer.

Although our numbers are now much reduced, this process still goes on. We continue to pray in depth as we try to live out the unity which Christ wills for his Church, in our relationships with one another in community and with all with whom we come into contact. In all this, the members of the Invisible Monastery everywhere have continued their hidden work. From our angle at the Convent, the late Revd Mary Holliday, Methodist minister and one time head of the Farncombe Community and then of the Fellowship of Prayer for Unity, is the real inspiration behind today's gathering and in a sense behind all of our Couturier celebrations. It was she who was inspired to try to revive interest in the Invisible Monastery in the 1990s. She looked forward to a big celebration this very weekend in 2003 when she would herself have been celebrating her eightieth birthday on the 24th March. In the event God had other plans for her. She died suddenly of cancer in 1997. A year later Paul Renyard with ourselves and others kept faith with Mary's vision. A small group of us met at Rempstone for a retreat/conference as Mary had wanted, to explore the spirituality of the Invisible Monastery. A seed was sown and we now reap the fruits with Mary smiling down on us and supporting us with her prayer.

But perhaps the most significant outcome at the Convent of our prayer and work for unity, as far as our own corporate prayer life is concerned, is to be found in our recently revised liturgical offices. Aspects have been incorporated from the various Christian traditions and spiritualities, and from Judaism, to form a richly satisfying whole, particularly sustaining during these days of rapid change and uncertainty. It is as though we are tapping into the underlying unity, finding our common bedrock, a ground which, in Christ, we share and by which we can support one another despite external division.

Our life at Rempstone continues, then, in the same ecumenical way as it did before at Haywards Heath and at Wapping. There is a newly-discovered happy link. One of the founders of APUC from the Roman Catholic side was Ambrose Phillips de Lisle, the very same person who founded the Cistercian Abbey of Mount St Bernard, a stone's throw away from us in Leicestershire and with whom we have frequent and friendly ecumenical contact. Moreover, one of the monks there turns out to be related to a friend of the past (now sadly departed) with whom we collaborated at Haywards Heath in the production of rosary beads and cards. The ecumenical world, though vast as the cosmos, as the Abbé knew in his prayers, is also very small.

Finally I would like to read from a letter received last December from Brother Francis SSF, now in Australia – the same Br Francis who helped to set us on our new ecumenical path in the 1950s. He mistakenly believes that the Abbé actually visited us but that can be excused in view of his venerable age:

‘Dear Sisters, As I am keeping my ninety ninth birthday next January 18th (i.e. 2003) I want to thank you for sending me your communications for so many years. I always found them very interesting. I always remember paying a visit to you with Abbé Paul Couturier and talking about his prayer for Christian Unity. I always hoped to see the union of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches before I died – but will I? – things move very slowly, but they are moving, but not until the next Pope, I feel, now. But there is certainly a different feeling of unity nowadays between the two communions. With God a long time is a short time...’

In a post-script he adds, 'I am busy writing my memoirs on a computer'. It is never too late then to learn, nor are we ever too old to go on hoping, believing, praying, in the spirit of Paul Couturier, that one day indeed we shall be one as our Lord both wills and enables.

Sister Mary Michael is an Anglican Benedictine nun of the Community of the Holy Cross. At their convent at Rempstone Hall near Loughborough, she and her sisters care for a treasured archive of material concerning Paul Couturier and the Week of Prayer as he recreated it. This paper was delivered at the March 2003 conference at Westminster.